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Saudi Arabia as a Resurgent Regional Power

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Abstract

For a prolonged period since the 1980s the MENA subsystem has been weakening under the weight of persistent inter-state conflict, violent non-state and sub-state actor incursions, and intense competition for influence and geopolitical advantage amongst its core states. Further, a domino of regime collapses across the Arab region since 2010 has heralded an unprecedented level of disorder, insecurity and chaos in the period following the rapid fall of several Arab autocrats. Regional disorder and the general crisis of the state in the Arab region has aggravated regional fragmentation and has at the same time emboldened Saudi Arabia and a small group of its neighbours to adopt a more interventionist, and at times belligerent foreign policy posture. Applying a complex realist approach, this paper traces the impact of the region's changing dynamics on Saudi Arabia and argues that the Kingdom's changing of the guard in 2015 has led to an intensification of Saudi activism and a deepening of its role as a resurgent regional power.

Introduction: MENA regional system

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is, in the emerging post-bipolar order, arguably the most strategically significant subsystem of the international system. Interstate relations in this subsystem are so intense and dynamic that many of these interactions end up having a significant impact on the wider international system. Further, the consequences of exercise of power, or loss of power, in this region tend to make a significant impression not only on the policies of the great (the United States) and major (the European Union, Russia, China, India, Japan) powers, but also on the diplomatic energies running through the veins of the myriad of inter-governmental organizations entrusted with managing and minimizing global insecurity. A brief glance at the agenda of the UN Security Council (the highest international body focusing on international peace and security), for example, will show that activities undertaken by the Council between 2010-2017 on the MENA region (including Afghanistan and Somalia), in terms of resolutions composed and adopted, far outweighed those focusing on other parts of the world. Indeed, of the 490 resolutions adopted in this period 230 of them had focused on the MENA region, accounting for over 45% of the Council's business.¹ This region is, as Hinnebusch, noted, the "epicentre of world crisis".² Instability in the area has increased the thirst for power, both as a shield and as a means for intervention. Power in the Middle East and North Africa subsystem, however – in terms of conditions of its accumulation, the manner of its accumulation, its disbursement, and also its decline – remains fluid and it is this fluidity which ensures that no one state can feel comfortable to let its power and influence drift. Power, seen here as the collection of ideas, tools and resources to effect change, and conversely to protect the status quo, is arguably the key essential ingredient of survival in such a hostile, dynamic and competitive

subsystem as the MENA. Further, power – that is to say exercise of it – is no longer a monopoly of the bigger regional actors. In this subsystem power is unevenly divided and small states, particularly those endowed with a combination of liquid (cash) resources and ambitious leaders can bring pressure to bear on others.³ Such states have even played a decisive role in the dynamics of change in the region – as has been shown in Qatari and Emirati interventions in Libya and Syria, Emirati intervention in Yemen, and exercise of Qatari and Emirati soft power in Egypt and Afghanistan. Power's fluidity is a driver of instability in this subsystem, which tests the capabilities of its state actors, and encourages, as a consequence, the inflow of non-state and sub-state actors to challenge state authority. Such interventions are more intense whenever and wherever a central government's grip appears weak or loosening. States, in response, have to appear strong, thus leading to their own deeper securitization as well as that of the environment in which they operate.

It is, therefore, arguably the context – the strategic environment – shaped through history and regional struggles which impact state behaviour in the MENA region. In the words of Paul Noble, foreign policy is partly determined “by the global and regional environments in which they operate”.⁴ It is less clear cut, however, that “systemic conditions” necessarily “shape” state behaviour, as Noble claims. Systemic conditions act a set of opportunities and constraints as well as a lever to pressure each state's direction of policy. System-level analysis does not suggest that the domestic conditions do not have a determining influence; far from it, policies and worldviews take shape at home and it is only through a process of distillation and power exchanges that they become tools in the hands of executive elites. As elites circulate, as in the case of Saudi Arabia since 2015, they bring with them new policy agendas and approaches to dealing with their respective strategic dilemmas. We can see in Arab monarchies such as Saudi Arabia that the worldviews of emerging dominant individuals and cliques, even in countries ruled and governed continuously by members of the same established elite, leave an indelible footprint on the policy outputs of the state.

The strategic environment in the MENA region is shaped by a combination of local (communal), national, interstate, and international forces and it is in the interactions between these unequal players that policy emerges. As noted above, the MENA regional system stands out as one of the most penetrated in the international system, and perhaps as a consequence of this it has been unable to create strong and cohesive regional institutions. Such inter-governmental organizations as the Arab League and the Arab Maghreb Union are in effect moribund, and many earlier groupings (such as the Arab Cooperation Council and the United Arab Republic) long ago disappeared without a trace. Indeed in the midst of a general crisis in the region today its one durable regional organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council, is also apparently tearing itself apart. Whether due to Saudi lack of faith in its continuing utility as a security shield or intense competition with Qatar on the regional stage, the GCC's troubled state merely underlies the fragility of inter-governmental organizations in a region fraught with tension and rivalry. Competitive pressure from within the system and applied pressure from the outside of the system make cooperative politics very difficult to manage in the MENA region, and thus enhance the sense of anarchy as a conditioning factor in relations. Regional conditions have also been adversely affected, it must be added, by the Arab region's crisis of identity, its intense

communal and inter-state crises, and the deep rivalries amongst competing non-Arab states playing out on Arab turf. The subsystem's non-Arab actors (Iran, Israel, and Turkey) have brought their own unique pressures to bear, and where they have found themselves in direct confrontation with each other, they have played these out in Arab lands.

The interplay between external powers and regional actors has tended to internationalize the region's myriad of crises quickly and thus sucked international actors into its multitude of conflict zones. Since the 1956 Suez crisis, through to the two major Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the three wars in the Persian Gulf sub-region since 1980, and the Afghan state crisis since 1979, major powers and international bodies have been sucked in as warriors or peacemakers, and more often than not as both. Just in the period since the Arab uprisings, external powers have been involved in military action in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, and as mediators in Afghanistan, the Gulf, Lebanon, the Sudan, Somalia, and of course in the Arab-Israeli theatre. Intense regional rivalries feed regional insecurity and fuel competition between states and their coopted state and non-state allies. Iranian-Saudi tensions, which have deepened since the 2003 Iraq war, and worsened with the JCPoA and then the Arab uprisings which torn the fabric of the Arab order apart and placed Iran and Saudi Arabia squarely in front of each other, exemplify this trend.

Foreign policy context

In a levels of analysis-type approach one can identify the key drivers of policy changes in the Kingdom as it considers the transformations taking place around it, and puts these in the broader context of its regional-level interests and international-level aspirations. Complex realism helps us better understand Saudi foreign policy making and the ways in which it has responded to regional crises and international tensions.⁵ Under this framework, one can assume that MENA policymakers are quintessential realists but whose environment is immeasurably more complicated, fluid and dynamic than realism anticipates. In this approach the weight of power and threat relations in shaping thinking is readily acknowledged, but this perspective argues that the realist approach does not adequately recognize how policy emerges. This blind spot means that realism misses policy 'construction' in the hands of elites and the ways in which elite circulation can affect interest formation and policy decisions. To get a handle on policy choices and derived decisions, therefore, we must unlatch the 'block box' of policy making to see how policy is negotiated, drafted and implemented. State policies will of course have a degree of rationality built into them but this is not to say that a rational actor model prevails. The idea of rationality, therefore, is thus only from the perspective of state actors themselves, whose worldviews and role conceptions are shaped by historically-specific experiences and a wide range of at times competing domestic considerations. So, regional context only accounts for the conditions of decisions; the other part of the equation is the role of the national leadership, and it is here that we can observe significant changes in Saudi Arabia.⁶

Domestic level: The focus on leadership is significant in this context, for, as has been argued elsewhere, in "regimes in which power is personalized and concentrated, and especially in times of fluidity or crisis, the leader's personal style, values, perceptions, and

misperceptions can make an enormous difference”.⁷ The changing of the guard, from King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to King Salman bin Abdulaziz in January 2015 has proved to be transformative. Shortly after taking power King Salman initiated a series of personnel changes at the highest level of governance whose key decision to name his son, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), as crown prince in June 2017, has proved to be the most important.

Using constructivist tools, it is possible to show that MbS has brought his interpretation of what Nonneman refers to as ‘meanings of facts and objects’ to bear on the Saudi foreign policy.⁸ The Crown Prince, in this sense, is internalizing as state policy his sense of the domestic and external environments in which the regime operates. Furthermore, as he strives to change the political economy of Saudi Arabia so he is also reconfiguring the Kingdom’s identity and self-perception. He is a self-proclaimed modernizer who sees the future through the lens of rapid economic progress and loosening of sociocultural constraints. So when the Crown Prince encourages female participation in the social, economic and political life of the country he is arguably pushing for the renegotiation of the role gender relations in the country; by the same token when the government removes the barriers to women driving, it is profoundly altering female access to the world beyond home and the workplace. In this regard, reforms affecting female participation in society will considerably raise Saudi women’s participation in the labour market from its current low level of just 20%. Women are needed as engines of change and by the end of the Vision 2030 strategy women could have added a further \$90 billion to the Kingdom’s economic output.⁹ To change the country’s economy, the Salman order is renegotiating the whole social contract, reducing the lavish welfare state, and introducing taxes. These are essential reforms for pushing the Kingdom away from its lingering rentier hangovers; in doing so it is also placing a much greater weight on the shoulders of Saudi nationals. With high youth unemployment and low productivity, the Kingdom needs to train its future workforce, present it with the opportunities for gainful employment and ensure that their lives are better than the ‘oil boomers’ generation, if it is to weather the economic problems ahead. Mobilization of the nationals, however, will have to be balanced against their empowerment if the somewhat smaller al-Saud ruling base is to manage the transition to a ‘knowledge’ economy and post-oil industrial power.

These are not easy undertakings. In the absence of quick gains and systematic liberalization of social norms, the apparent attack by MbS on the conservative religious establishment could potentially generate a major backlash, for example, which could derail the whole Vision 2030 project. Without meaningful political liberalization, furthermore, change can only be limited. But how can the Saudi system be liberalized and not echo the concerns of the ulama who have been loyal allies of the al-Sauds for a hundred years? How can it renegotiate the Saudi version of Islam with the ulama and maintain the al-Saud order’s core legitimacy intact?

As we have seen, radical Islamists can act against the state’s interests with ease and their actions can hurt the Kingdom. Blow back from their Wahhabi and Salafist adventurism, for example, was swift following 9/11, as the West began to put systematic pressure on the Kingdom to ‘reform’ its culture and educational system to reign in support for Osama bin

Laden and his al-Qaeda movement. On the eve of the Islamic State's growing power in 2014, moreover, some 2,500 Saudi nationals were already fighting for the IS group and IS was threatening the Kingdom with bomb blasts and assassination plots. Thus, the need to fight the brewing domestic threat is omnipresent.

The internal changes and dramatic policy initiatives since 2015 speak of a strong Saudi desire to reduce its direct dependency on external powers, which had been the enduring feature of its foreign policy until 9/11. In reality, however, since 2017 the Kingdom has been quick to restore its close relations with the United States under the Trump administration and revitalize its close military and intelligence ties with the United States. In order to achieve its regional objectives against Iran and to assert itself as the dominant Arab power, Riyadh has willingly (re)attached its wagon to that of the United States in the region, but whether it had really distanced itself from its most powerful and reliable backer remains in question. It, arguably, never loosened the critical life-support ties with Washington.

The Kingdom has, at the same time, set about building closer and closer partnerships with China, the European Union, India, and also Russia. With virtually all of these parties, energy drives Saudi policy, which remains a hard power tool in the Kingdom's toolkit. As a consequence of its outreach strategy, thus, Saudi Arabia has dared to go beyond the United States and build partnerships with other global actors, which has made the Kingdom one of the best networked countries in the world, and its voice is heard, and its presence felt in many parts of the world. Much of this networking is of course in the interest of building up the country and securing Saudi Arabia itself.

The Crown Prince, having stepped over Prince Mohammed bin Nayef as Crown Prince, is now all-powerful in the Kingdom's small core. Also holding the posts of First Deputy Prime Minister, Defence Minister, and Chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs, has enabled him to secure access to the most important levers of governance and has made it possible for him to exercise tremendous power and influence.¹⁰ Such concentration of power in the Kingdom is unprecedented and the fact that the Crown Prince has squeezed all competing princes out of the traditionally close al-Saud governing circles is challenging the established rules of the game in the Kingdom: "he can do whatever he wants now. All the checks and balances are gone", noted a prominent Saudi commentator with close links to the family.¹¹ More unsettling has been the action he took in November 2017 to incarcerate dozens of his powerful cousins and their elite allies on charges of corruption and abuse of public funds. This act did not only alienate many of his powerful cousins but has undone the consensus-based Saudi approach to decision making. It was not lost on close observers of the Kingdom that the regime cannot speak of the need for the rule of law to prevail and then lock up, without any trial or public discussion, some of the country's most influential men on charges of corruption or abuse of position.

On the all-important economic front, critical transformative change has been occurring under Mohammad bin Salman who has made it his mission to change the Kingdom's political economy by reducing the economy's dependence on external oil revenues. This is critically important going forward as Saudi Arabia is worryingly watching the formation of a perfect energy storm against it. There is, on the one hand, the rise of the United States as an

exporter of oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), rapidly reaching Saudi Arabia's markets in Europe and Asia.¹² On the other, Iran and Qatar are raising their natural gas export capacities substantially in response to the global climate change rules which will require massive reductions on the use of crude oil as a source of energy, with crude oil exports being Saudi Arabia's lifeline. For some analysts, Saudi warmth towards the United States and measured hostility towards Iran and Qatar can also be explained through the lens of the rapidly-changing global energy markets in which the Kingdom will need the muscle of its American energy competitor to subdue the competition from its close neighbours. Closer proximity to China and India, also, are designed to secure for the Kingdom medium to long term markets in Asia, certainly until such a time as it can afford to look at the horizon beyond oil exports as its lifeline.

Regional level: As already noted, foreign policy in the MENA region is a product of complex interactions between internal forces and national priorities in which regional developments provide the backdrop, strategic context if you will, for policy formulation. It is arguably the rapidly changing, deteriorating, regional environment, which provides the context for the perceptible changes in the Kingdom's foreign policy and regional behaviour.¹³ The MENA subsystem has shaped Saudi Arabia and its policies, with Islam (identity), energy (economy), and security providing the three dimensions of its concerns.

Analysts of Saudi Arabia used to depict the Kingdom's default foreign policy as a form of passive engagement, timid in its relationships, reactive and non-confrontational. Saudi Arabia started out as cautious regional actor.¹⁴ The dominant view was that the "traditional Saudi foreign policy since King Faisal has been reactive and cautious. The kingdom was risk averse. National security policy was often done by clandestine means; force was avoided. Kings were decisive but careful not to overextend their capacity".¹⁵ Saudi Arabia's vulnerabilities to global oil market fluctuations, persistent geopolitical pressures, and the ever-present assertive regional actors on its doorstep – from Nasser's Egypt, to Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Iran's Ayatollahs – had raised since the 1950s the Kingdom's reliance on Western powers and its acute dependence on the United States as the country's security backstop, its security guarantor. The 1970s is the period in which Saudi Arabia became more engaged regionally, helped by the introduction of the Nixon Doctrine-based 'two pillar' Persian Gulf policy in the aftermath of Britain's military disengagement from territories 'east of Suez' in 1971. This arguably created the close petro-military relationship with the United States, which has directly influenced Saudi Arabia's regional policies.¹⁶ Bandwagoning with the United States served Saudi interests well and delayed the need for it to balance against its regional adversaries, but this was not then to depict the Kingdom as a passive regional actor.

Saudi Arabia has arguably been an active regional player since the 1950s. In the 1960s, the most dramatic decade of inter-Arab ideological struggles, its role in containing the spread of the Arab nationalist wave pitted it directly against Egypt and its allies in the region, a struggle which Saudi Arabia arguably won.¹⁷ It also reached out to Islamist forces confronting Nasser's secular nationalist agenda and formed a bond with the Nasser's key opponents in the Muslim Brotherhood and in the Muslim World League. Its voice,

moreover, as the home of Islam, has presented it with soft power and cultural influence across the Muslim world since the collapse of the Ottoman empire in early twentieth century. This soft power the Kingdom has used to great effect since the late 1970s to garner support for itself and to cultivate local forces in many parts of the Muslim world – in southeast Asia, Central Asia, sub-Sahara Africa and even amongst Muslim communities in China, Europe and North America. It has also used very effectively the Organization of Islamic Conference as a foreign policy tool, whether against the Soviets in Afghanistan, against Israel's occupation of Arab lands, and more recently against Iran. Indeed, the promotion of Wahhabism had been a trait of the Kingdom's external posture throughout the post-1945 period and featured heavily in Riyadh's proxy war with President Nasser of Egypt in Yemen and elsewhere. Wahhabism export grew most dramatically following the Iranian revolution and the West's campaign to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan following their invasion of the Muslim neighbour in 1979. For the Kingdom not only was this a just cause, holy jihad to defend Muslims from un-Godly communists, but also to compete with Iran's Shia revolutionary brand. By 1989, Saudi Arabia had created an army of battle-hardened jihadists who readily turned on the hand that had fed them for 10 years when Riyadh invited Western military forces on its soil to help reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Bin Laden and al-Qaeda grew from the ranks of the same disgruntled jihadists who saw in the US a greater enemy than the Soviet Union. Saudi statecraft was also in evidence in 1981 when it forged the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council as an all-Arab and Gulf Arab monarchy defence pact, and again for the active role it played in garnering regional and international support for Iraq's military campaign against Iran.

MENA regional instability then is not a new phenomenon and the Arab order, at the heart of the regional system, has arguably been eroding since the breakdown of Arab consensus leading up to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war following Egypt's unilateral peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Egypt's apparent abandonment of the core Arab cause created a major crack in the Arab order and not only left the Arab monarchies, President Anwar al-Sadat's main Arab allies, adrift but created new tensions between them and the so-called 'rejectionists' (notably Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and the PLO). The inter-state tensions following Camp David was compounded by the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran in the same year and the emergence of the MENA region's first Islamist revolutionary regime. This was another blow to the Arab monarchies but the revolution also deepened the intra-Ba'athist rivalry between Baghdad and Damascus. While Syria tied itself closely to the new Iranian regime, Iraq drew close to the Arab monarchies and mobilized its forces to confront the Shia-led regime in Tehran, which had already displayed aggressive intent towards Iraq and the Gulf's Arab monarchies. Thus, regional conditions have been deteriorating since the late 1970s and regional states have been adjusting their policies in response to this. What is perhaps more significant is the fact that in a relatively short space of time, and as a result of particular developments in the region, what appeared as fractures gave way to fragmentation, which led to eventual polarization. Polarization, in the absence of supportive regional structures, has caused a paralysis in the Arab regional framework and mounting regional crises have atomized the Arab order and encouraged competition between the stronger regional states. These conditions have been both an opportunity and a problem for

the Kingdom. Fragmentation certainly weakened the Arab base on which it had traditionally relied, but it also gave Riyadh the opportunity to push itself to the forefront of regional politics and bid for Arab leadership following the demise or mortally weakened formerly powerful regimes in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Syria in the 2003-2012 period.

For all its growing voice in the 1970s, however, and perhaps because of it, Saudi Arabia became a prime victim of the regional developments at that time.¹⁸ Gause describes Riyadh's strategic dilemmas of the time rather well, in writing: "The United States... pushed Riyadh to support Egypt and the new [Egypt-Israel peace] treaty. Iraq and Syria, leading a solid Arab bloc, urged the Saudis to join them in cutting ties to Egypt and opposing the treaty. Meanwhile, the Iranian revolution had stirred up Islamic political activity throughout the region, including in Saudi Arabia itself".¹⁹ These were overwhelming strategic pressures which put Riyadh in an impossible situation. Saudi Arabia could not abandon its principles of Muslim solidarity (against Israeli occupation) and Arab unity for expediency and therefore decided to cut loose its ties with its close ally, Sadat's Egypt, but it also resisted running to the embrace of Baghdad and Damascus. Balancing was the Kingdom's classic reaction to the crisis. Before the year was out, however, the Iran-Iraq war became a new and immediate cause of distress requiring extensive diplomatic and political engagement in support of Iraq. The war, however, also provided the first sign of the Kingdom being ready to use its armed forces in anger, as it did with its brand new air force against Iran in 1984.²⁰ This episode provided the first piece of evidence that the Kingdom was not frightened of taking military action in the face of Iranian pressure and, albeit with American assistance, was prepared to act as equal power in the post-twin pillar Persian Gulf environment. A strong military, spectrum American support, and brandishing of its sophisticated armour formed the legacy of a highly securitized Persian Gulf subregion at the heart of the Kingdom's foreign policy concerns.

Riyadh had arguably been emboldened under the Reagan administration to act in defence of its own immediate interests and to intervene in regional affairs where necessary. Action in its own defence also included covert contacts with China and the secret purchasing of intermediate-range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles from China in 1988: "a weapon powerful enough to deter any potential enemy from attacking us".²¹ Despite American pressure, the Kingdom proceeded to operationalize its 'East Wind' (Chinese designation DF-3A) missiles batteries and created a Strategic Missile Force command to manage this force. This acquisition, argues Prince Khaled bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz, "represented a turning point in Saudi Arabia's defence strategy and must be placed in the context of proliferation missile systems [in the region] and reflected the Kingdom's growing responsibilities in the Middle East, in the Muslim world as a whole, and on the world stage".²² A self-aware Saudi Arabia had arrived, whose geopolitical and geo-cultural position in the region came to test barely two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

In Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Kingdom was thrust to centre stage as the anti-Iraq alliance's main base and the front in the 1991 war for the liberation of Kuwait. Saudi armour and military force was extensively used in the campaign and Saudi Arabia learned to sharpen its diplomatic tools further in its efforts to create a credible Arab and Muslim

coalition against Iraq.²³ In negotiations with the West over the future of the region following the war, and to deter other parties from mobilizing in Baghdad's defence, Riyadh became the crossroads of diplomatic exchanges.²⁴ The short duration and success of that campaign added to the Kingdom's regional weight, and its standing was further elevated when it emerged as the joint-broker, with the United States, of the collective Arab diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. What had been launched as the Fahd Plan in 1981, evolved in the Arab blueprint for regional peace.

So, since 1979 the Kingdom had arguably been in a crisis management mode more or less continuously and in the following decade not only did it manage to create the Arab region's most sophisticated military machine but also established itself as the region's most influential voice on the international stage. It had the financial means to act internationally as well as the support from its Western partners to assert itself regionally.

But regional conditions changed dramatically, indeed worsened from the Saudi perspective, in 2003 as the war to remove Saddam Hussein unleashed a chain of events which dramatically improved the prospects of its regional rival, Iran. This war, arguably, was the harbinger of major change in Saudi behaviour, for America's war in Iraq compromised much of Saudi Arabia's security calculus, dramatically changing as it did the regional landscape and the Arab balance of power. Destruction of the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath ruling establishment in Iraq resulted in Saudi Arabia losing the one Gulf country able to act as balancer of Iran.²⁵ Deepening Saudi fears of a resurgent Iran, now able to threaten Saudi interests directly can be traced to this episode, in which post-Saddam Iraq became the playground of Iranian revolutionaries. This war, fought against the advice of US' Arab allies, forced the Kingdom to chart a new pathway for its regional role as the defender of Sunni-Arab countries and communities, and in taking up the mantle of the defender of the Arab order. Iraq, in the Saudi view, had been handed over to Iran by the Bush administration and the ensuing strategic change in the regional balance of power would come to amplify Saudi vulnerabilities and concerns of an embolden Tehran now able to act more unhindered in the wider region. Iran was no longer 'contained' and its presence in Iraq would give it strategic depth for its national security, as well as the platform to extend its influence in this divided country, facilitate access to its close allies in Syria and Lebanon, and of course give it a greater presence at the heart of the Arab order in the Levant. Since then, fear of a rampant 'Shia crescent' dominated by Iran provided the strategic backdrop to Saudi regional posturing and alliance building.

Role of Islam too has changed and has gone through a step change in the 2010s, bringing the Kingdom into line with its Western allies. Its contribution of \$100 million in August 2017 to the UN's Counter-terrorism Centre was meant to consolidate Riyadh's position as a member of the international anti-terror coalition. Such gestures did not however herald an end to Riyadh's support for, or promotion of Salafi forces and ideas across the Muslim world. In the age of identity rivalries mapped onto state competition, Saudi version of Islam remains a powerful tool in countering Iran's Shia-led march across the region.

At the *international level*, change has been taking place in two ways. First, the Kingdom's own place has changed dramatically, building on its role as the cradle of Islam, and more

emphatically because of its role as OPEC's 'swing producer' of oil which has given it considerable influence in determining the direction of oil prices and also because of its considerable financial power. Saudi Arabia's integration into the global capitalist system set the Kingdom apart from the other primary commodity producers and the sheer weight of its oil power created a condition of what Gause characterizes as 'asymmetric interdependence' rather than dependence.²⁶ Since the 1970s its petrodollars have helped it open doors in the West, create a mighty military machine, and build economic bridges westwards and eastwards. Its economic prowess has been recognized by its membership of the G20 top economies of the world. As it has migrated upwards in the global economic system so the Kingdom has also become more sensitive to global currents, and while interacting with global leaders it has been able to cultivate new economic and diplomatic relationships.

Secondly, the Kingdom's global relations have become more complex and Saudi Arabia's first real negative experience on the world stage came after 9/11, which pointed the dial of global terrorism towards the Kingdom. This catastrophic incident, led by a group of Saudi militants, has arguably left a deep mark on Riyadh's role conception. The spotlight on its society and religious practices caused the Kingdom's elite some discomfort and forced it to justify its international conduct for the first time. While accepting to introduce changes to its school curriculum and religious education, it also went on the offensive to show the Kingdom's important role in the international system. This marked the first phase of Riyadh coming out of its protective shell. It was, arguably, fear of losing the American security cover following 9/11 which provided the key catalyst for Saudi pro-activism. While President Bush went out of his way following the Iraq war to court the Saudis and proceeded to grease the wheel of diplomacy with massive arms sales to the Kingdom, the real crisis in the alliance appeared during President Obama's presidency. In this period, America's arms-length attitude towards its Arab allies reeling under the pressure of Arab protests pushed the monarchies in particular to play a more central role in the region. Saudi Arabia, playing catch up with its smaller neighbours, accelerated its involvement following the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in 2013 and the militarization of the Syrian conflict in the same year. As regional security conditions deteriorated, Riyadh led the counter-revolutionary campaign in the Arab region. It, on the one hand, financially and militarily supporting the beleaguered al-Khalifa elite in Bahrain and financially cushioning the Egyptian economy to aid General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, took up arms against Houthi rebels in Yemen, and supported a plethora of Islamist groups against the Assad regime in Syria, on the other.

As the MENA subsystem has been penetrated by external (international) powers, so they have inevitably come to play a significantly greater role in shaping the behaviour of local actors.²⁷ The end of the Cold War in 1989 has not only not diminished external interventions but as a result of the regional system's fragility and instability, has in many respects, intensified the involvement of the great and major powers.²⁸

So, when such a great power as the United States chooses to 'lead from behind' in the region (as it did during President Obama's second term in office) it still has to ensure that its regional alliances are catered for and so compensates for its unexpected acts by a rush of

military hardware to the apparently more vulnerable such allies.²⁹ President Obama's peace overtures to Iran from 2012 and offer of a nuclear deal to reduce the international sanctions regime on the Islamic Republic merely deepened Saudi fears. American balancing was seen as abandonment and a tilt towards the regional rival.³⁰ Coming on the back of the region-wide security storms caused by the Arab uprisings in the region, it was the secret initiative, conducted through the good offices of Saudi Arabia's GCC partner, Oman, to reach a nuclear détente with the Islamic Republic which finally ended Saudi Arabia's foreign policy reticence and unleashed the Kingdom's aspiration to become the Arab region's dominant power. Petrodollars and oil exports dominance were squarely in the service of building a militarily strong and politically masculine regional actor, to become a fully-fledged MENA middle power.³¹

The United States' real or perceived 'disengagement' strategy did generate policy dilemmas for local powers, and for such competing regional powers as Iran and Saudi Arabia anticipation of a weak United States proved to be a decisive factor in their calculations: Driving Tehran to consolidate its regional position and Riyadh to develop a more aggressive and independent foreign policy posture. In the Trump era, the US role has again changed and despite its declared aim of disengaging from the troubled Middle East, its policies – whether unpicking President Obama's nuclear deal, disengaging from Syria in favour of the Bashar status quo, reengaging more fully with Saudi Arabia, or shifting the balance of power in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in favour of Israel – and actions are further destabilizing the already fragile inter-state relations in the region. But the Trump administration's unquestioning support for Riyadh has encouraged the Salmans to be even more bold and adventurous, which can be seen in relation to the Kingdom's devastating war against the Houthis in Yemen, and in its hostile attempt to create an Arab coalition of four (with Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE) against neighbouring Qatar whose foreign policy has been strongly questioned.

Saudi Arabia as a resurgent middle power

Tim Niblock had observed in 2006 that the Kingdom faced a three-pronged problem urgently needing structural remedies if the country was to prosper. The three problems as Niblock saw them were, "how to make Saudi labour competitive internationally and reduce the need for migrant labour, how to maintain regime security and national security..., and how to bring within the system some of the groupings currently alienated from it".³² The Salmans, arguably, have accepted the challenge and in their drive to deliver their Vision 2030 and giving women and wider society more breathing space, are trying to address the first core problem. Saudization, however, means forcing the Saudi workforce to work in the private sector and the latter employing them, cutting subsidies and privileges, and making them 'more competitive'. This is a risky business in a country whose population has been become addicted to rentier customs and in which labour practices remain opaque and monetarization of work unclear. Thus, the question needs to be raised if the regime is able to successfully transform Saudi Arabia's population from the status of subjects into citizens, and therefore stakeholders, without incurring a heavy political cost.

Also, It is also far from clear how MbS' unsuited war on the al-Saud elite, who have been an organic part of the al-Saud ruling class, can reduce alienation. Through their economic and political strategies, the Salmans appear to be destabilizing the two important pillars of al-Saud power.

In the light of the above, the Crown Prince's execution of the Kingdom's new policies would appear rather problematic, and this brings us back to the economic core of the reforms engulfing the Kingdom. The Salman duo seem to be caught between the necessity of restructuring the economy away from oil and at the same time desperately needing oil income to plug the country's budgetary problems. But this is a hard task while they are also financing the very expensive war in Yemen,³³ financially supporting Egypt and Bahrain and Sunni communities in Lebanon, providing backing for Pakistan, financing Tehran's opponents, as well as keeping citizens at home happy.

Since the Kingdom hit the world stage in 1973 with its high-value petrodollars and greater voice in Arab circles (which included its leading role in the oil embargo against the West), speculation about its wider role have remained. Saudi Arabia had been an Arab actor of note in its own right for half a century, but from the early 1970s it clearly took the necessary steps towards becoming a regional power. However, while in the 1980s and 1990s it did not have the full military, demographic and strategic trimmings of a middle power, it has since the 2000s been making every effort to compensate for these components of assertive power through a more aggressive diplomatic posture. So, even when it finally got the support to join the highest inter-state security forum in the world, it refused to take up its United Nations Security Council seat in October 2013 in protest for Security Council failure to "carry its duties and responsibilities" in Syria and over use and pursuit of WMDs by regional countries.³⁴ Its protest was meaningful while it saved the Kingdom from having to join the Council and compromise its principles or expose its weaknesses. Arguably only a confident power could take such a bold step.

It is evident that winds of change have been blowing in the Kingdom for some time, and just as the late "King Abdullah provide[d] an excellent case study of both the impact of a change of leadership and how to handle old problems in innovative ways", so does arguably his successor.³⁵ In this new era, however, the architect of the Kingdom's new foreign policy is in danger of spreading the regime too thin for it to be able to meet its multiple objectives and to successfully manage the domestic and regional challenges facing it. First amongst these is the stated goal of defeating what the Crown Prince has referred to as the 'triangle of evil' (Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and jihadists in al-Qaeda, IS, etc.).³⁶ We can surmise that the Saudis will aim to defeat the Brotherhood by working closely with Egypt and the UAE, will confront terror groups by being part of an international coalition, and try and push Iran back by working more closely with the United States and coordinating with Washington's trusted regional allies (namely Israel). To defeat the 'triangle of evil' is no easy task and to beat 'terror groups' will require the Kingdom facing the demon of jihadism at home; while trying to roll back Iranian influence will require a stable base at home to ensure that Tehran cannot use its long arm to shake the foundations of the Kingdom. To deal with Iran, and what MbS has called the expansionist 'Hitler' of the Middle East, he has promised to take

the fight to Iran itself and to challenge its presence in neighbouring Arab countries – Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Yemen – directly. In this exercise, the Saudis have reached out to other groups and countries and in Iraq for example have cultivated the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr as a potential ally against Iran. Much of this grand scheme requires control of the GCC states as Saudi Arabia's first line of defence, but as we have seen since the summer of 2017 the GCC's state bonds have been shaken by the direct Saudi-led alliance of Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE who launched a direct assault on Qatar. The GCC is today a fractured regional organization, if not totally broken, and with the demise of the GCC the Kingdom's first circle of defence will have been weakened.

In Yemen, which is a first tier national security concern, the Saudis have managed to alienate local parties and have turned the campaign against what was a non-state tribal militia into a protracted costly war with catastrophic humanitarian consequences. As Miller and Sokolsky have observed, under the Crown Prince's direction "the Saudis along with some of their Gulf Arab allies have conducted a relentless and brutal air campaign that has caused a humanitarian catastrophe, killing thousands of civilians, inflicting massive damage on civilian infrastructure and worsening an ongoing famine. The Saudis are stuck in a quagmire: Their military campaign, even after doubling down, has failed to dislodge the Houthis and their allies from the capital or wrest control of the northern part of the country; and they have no viable diplomatic strategy for ending the war. By aiding and abetting the Saudis in Yemen, the United States has empowered Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, strengthened Iranian influence in Yemen, undermined Saudi security and brought Yemen closer to the brink of collapse. The Saudis have driven themselves—and the United States—into a deep ditch in the country. They need to stop digging to get out".³⁷ With no clear end game in sight and human and material cost of the war rising this can hardly be seen as a foreign or defence policy success. So, for the foreseeable future, the Saudis and their closest ally in the war (the UAE) will have to maintain a strong and expensive presence in order to stabilize this shattered country. Saudi resistance to Kuwaiti mediation efforts to end the Yemen war also speak of an increasingly one-dimensional foreign policy approach in which diplomacy is trumped in favour of direct action.

Nor is the crisis with Qatar has been particularly well-handled by the Saudis (and their Abu Dhabi allies). The attempts to isolate a brotherly neighbour with whom the Kingdom shares a land border, family and tribal, as well as religious ties and practices, has totally disrupted the normal flow of GCC interactions. Despite the heavy costs imposed on tiny Qatar, not only has it survived but it has managed to thrive by using its abundant financial assets and diplomatic networks to compensate for its isolation. Here too, it is Saudi Arabia which is on the defensive as Doha has managed to convince the West, notably the United States, of its strategic importance and has so successfully traded with the non-Arab neighbours of Iran and Turkey that these countries' fresh and processed produce are now widely available and welcomed by the local population. The likely digging of a \$1 billion canal (Salwa canal) in 2018/19 across the desert border between the two countries will be seen by the Qataris as the final gesture of divorce from Riyadh and will arguably merely push Doha towards the very countries (Iran and Turkey primarily) whose influence in the Arab and closer Gulf region the Saudis have been trying to contain.

The cajoling by the Trump administration of Saudi Arabia to be more active regionally and to take greater responsibility – indeed risk – for containment of Iran and destruction of IS and al-Qaeda have further emboldened Riyadh, which – assured of American backing – is more aggressively pursuing its new agendas in the region. According to an insider's account of the Trump administration debates about its policy options, the "judgement was that we needed to find a change agent. That's where M.B.S. came in. We were going to embrace him as the change agent".³⁸ Undoing the damage of the 'Arab Spring' has been one clear goal of the Kingdom since 2011, but the focus of its policies has shifted more dramatically to confront Iran on the regional stage and compete with it in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Central and South Asia, and of course in Syria. Prince Mohammed bin Salman's view of Saudi policy is clear: "We are pushing back on these Iranian moves. We've done this in Africa, Asia, in Malaysia, in Sudan, in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon. We believe that after push back, the problems will move inside Iran. We don't know if the regime will collapse or not – it's not the target, but if it collapses, great, it's their problem. We have a war scenario in the Middle East right now. This is very dangerous for the world. We cannot take the risk here. We have to take serious painful decisions now to avoid painful decisions later".³⁹ Saudi activism therefore has become all-encompassing under the two Salmans, "from attempts to influence politics in Iraq to limit the rising influence of Iran, to heavily investing in Lebanon to counter Hezbollah's influence, to working clandestinely and aggressively to organize and support opposition to the Bashar Assad regime in Syria. It's not that Saudi Arabia had not for decades used its economic and political influence to affect regional politics; it is that the degree to which that was true, including taking initiative and using enormous resources, reflected a sense of strategic urgency".⁴⁰ Activism can also seem like adventurism.

The transition from gradualism to rapid action is clear for all to see and the Salmans' domestic policies and regional behaviour point to a process of change which is being unleashed on the international stage. The King and his Crown Prince have not shied away from tough decisions and have for the first time shown an appetite to put (their understanding of) the national interest first. Whether that means a more explicit acceptance of Israel, an implicit surrender of Palestinian rights, direct confrontation with Iran, or fighting the Kingdom's real and imagined enemies through the newly-formed coalition of the 40-member Islamic Military Counterterrorism Alliance.⁴¹ It also has meant a more militarized foreign policy and application of pressure on other countries to toe the Saudi line.⁴² It remains to be seen, however, how the Salmans' aggressive foreign policy can enhance national security and improve regime legitimacy in the medium term.

Saudi Arabia is now an instrumental partner in the birth of a new American-crafted 'neo-twin pillar' regional security order, which may well become a regional security structure if the Trump administration extends into a second term, in which responsibility is shared with another non-Arab regional power; this time of course it is Israel. The irony of a chief Arab state ganging up with the region's only non-Muslim non-Arab power against the other powerful non-Arab Muslim country cannot be ignored here, but the impact such a security pact under American tutelage can only worsen regional security dynamics. For the Trump administration, this pact is vital and presents itself under the leadership of MbS as the only way to recover the vast spaces 'lost to Iran': "our anchors were Israel and Saudi Arabia. We

can't be successful [against Iran] in the Gulf without Saudi Arabia".⁴³ Forty years since the demise of the original US-sponsored twin pillar security structure Saudi Arabia appears to be the only state in the Persian Gulf with the diplomatic means, the leadership and the political will, and the military force to take steps to recast the MENA region to its vision of Arab-Islamism. The issue, in my view, then is no longer about Saudi Arabia being a middle power, for it now certainly acts as one and its greater international presence helps it underwrite its greater regional role. What is more important then is the need to understand the policies and ambitions of this resurgent power under a new type of leadership. When the Crown Prince declares in a public meeting that "I have twenty years to reorient my country and launch it into the future",⁴⁴ then one realizes that the old rules of the game have been torn up and new ones being written just as quickly as the most influential al-Saud in the Kingdom can run.⁴⁵ Rapid transformation at home is occurring at a time of great uncertainty and instability abroad in the MENA region, which perhaps adds to the leadership's sense of urgency to make changes at home concrete. All the while that they do so, they seem to be adding uncertainty to the viability of their enterprise, and to fears of more conflicts arising from the inherent dangers of the Kingdom's unbridled foreign policy.

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¹ Data gathered from the UN Security Council, <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/>

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³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Small States with a Big Role: Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (Durham: al-Sabah Publications Series, No. 3, October 2012).

⁴ Paul Noble, 'From Arab System to Middle Eastern System?: Regional Pressures and Constraints', in Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (eds) *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), p. 67.

⁵ See Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Foreign Policymaking in the Middle East: Complex Realism', in Louise Fawcett (ed.) *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 239-258.

⁶ Silvia Colombo, 'Foreign Policy Activism in Saudi Arabia and Oman. Diverging Narratives and Stances towards the Syrian and Yemeni Conflicts', *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2017, pp. 54-70

⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁸ Gerd Nonneman, 'Analyzing the Foreign Policies of the Middle East and North Africa: A Conceptual Framework', in Gerd Nonneman (ed.) *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), pp. 6-18.

⁹ See <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-24/saudi-women-driving-is-seen-better-for-economy-than-aramco-ipo>

¹⁰ Umer Karim, 'The Evolution of Saudi Foreign Policy and the Role of Decision-making Process and Actors', *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2017, pp. 71-88.

¹¹ Jamal Khashoggi, quoted in Filkins, Dexter Filkins, 'A Saudi Prince's Quest to Remake the Middle East', <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>

¹² In 2017, the United States was the world's largest producer of petroleum and natural gas hydrocarbons, according to the International Energy Agency. US crude oil production had reached 9.7 million barrels per day (mb/d) and exports around 1.1 mb/d: It was exporting its oil to 37 different countries in 2017. By 2022, moreover, it will be exporting 4.0 mb/d. In terms of gas production and exports, the US had registered a 47% increase in gas production in the 2006-2016 decade, to 28.5 trillion cubic feet (TcF). In 2017, it exported 2.7 TcF per day, which is set to increase to 9.8 TcF per day by the end of 2019. US can now produce more oil than Saudi Arabia and it can match gas outputs of Iran, Qatar and Russia. <https://www.energyindepth.org/u-s-oil-and-natural-gas-exports-projected-to-soar-in-2018/>; <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Why-US-Oil-Exports-Are-Surging.html>; <http://www.worldoil.com/news/2018/5/22/eia-us-remains-the-world-s-top-producer-of-petroleum-and-natural-gas-hydrocarbons>

¹³ To fully understand how a state formulates its policies and articulates its foreign policy posture we will need a clear understanding of the regional and international environments. For a conceptual discussion of this, see Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliafeoor, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ F. Gregory Gause III, 'The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia', in Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds) *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), pp. 193-211.

¹⁵ Bruce Riedel, op. cit.

¹⁶ Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (eds) *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (London: Hurst, 2005).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁹ F. Gregory Gause III, op. cit., p. 207.

²⁰ In June 1984, a dogfight over the Persian Gulf resulted in Saudi F-15 Eagle, under the guidance of US-operated AWACS early warning aircraft, chasing and shooting down one Iranian F-4 Phantom fighter as a warning against Iran's targeting of GCC oil tanker traffic. It was reported at the time that Iran "scrambled a total of 11 planes, which remained in Iranian airspace, and the Saudis countered by sending up more than that number of its own planes". <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/06/05/Saudi-Arabian-fighters-shot-down-two-Iranian-fighter-bombers-in/7626455256000/>

²¹ HRH General Khaled bin Sultan, *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 138.

²² Ibid.

²³ Peter W. Wilson and Douglas F. Graham, *Saudi Arabia: The Coming Storm* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharp, 1994).

²⁴ A sympathetic account of Saudi Arabia's role in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm can be found in Nasser Ibrahim Rashid and Esber Ibrahim Shaheen, *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf War* (Joplin, MO: International Institute of Technology, 1992).

²⁵ Dina Badie, *After Saddam: American Foreign Policy and the Destruction of Secularism in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017).

²⁶ F. Gregory Gause III, 'The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia', in Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds) *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014), pp. 185-206.

²⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Explaining International Politics in the Middle East: The Struggle of Regional Identity and Systemic Structure', in Gerd Nonneman (ed.) *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), pp. 243-256.

²⁸ Hassan Hamdan al-Alkim, *Dynamics of Arab Foreign Policy-Making in the Twenty-First Century: Domestic Constraints and External Challenges* (London: Saqi, 2011).

²⁹ The Obama administration agreed to sell some \$100 billion worth of weaponry to the Kingdom in 2012, partly in response to a perceived Iranian threat and partly to compensate for the administration's uncritical approach to the fall of such pro-Western Arab leaders as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt.

³⁰ Awadh Al-Badi, 'Saudi-Iranian Relations: A Troubled Trajectory', in Gawdat Bahgat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Neil Quilliam (eds) *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 189-209.

³¹ See Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Middle East Middle Powers: Regional Role, International Impact', *Uluslararası İlişkiler* (International Relations), Vol. 11, No. 42, Summer 2014, pp. 29-49.

³² Tim Niblock, op. cit., p. 173.

³³ The war may have cost Saudi Arabia over \$5.0 billion in the first year of its execution and perhaps in excess of \$700 million per month. See Bruce Riedel, 'Saudi King Shows no Signs of Slowing Aggressive Foreign Policy', <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/saudi-arabia-king-salman-yemen-war-foreign-policy-qatar-g20.html>

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- ⁴⁰ Shibley Telhami, 'Mohammed bin Salman, Son of the Iraq War', <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/21/mohammed-bin-salman-son-of-the-iraq-war/>
- ⁴¹ The Alliance's inaugural meeting took place in November 2017 in Riyadh and excluded Algeria, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and all the Central Asian Muslim Republics. Qatar was the only member country which had absented itself from the meeting. <http://www.dw.com/en/saudi-led-islamic-military-alliance-counterterrorism-or-counter-iran/a-41538781>
- ⁴² Eman Ragab, 'Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring', *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2017, pp. 37-53.
- ⁴³ Dexter Filkins, op. cit.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Conversations between MbS and his UAE counterpart, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, also need to be taken into account when trying to make sense of the degree of change taking place in Saudi Arabia's regional behaviour. Personal views are clearly close and a convergence of policies, if not interests, over many of the regional issues are evident. In Egypt, Yemen, Iran, Syria, they share a common platform and over countering al-Qaeda, IS and the Muslim Brotherhood their approaches also converge. They both also press their relationship with the United States and President Trump's administration in particular as a priority.